

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS  
HON. GEORGE K. HEARTWELL, MAYOR  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN  
January 30, 2010

Good morning, and welcome to the seventh annual State of the City Address that it has been my pleasure to present.

Thank you Dr. Haas. I certainly appreciate your willingness to serve as Master of Ceremonies this morning. But even more I am grateful for the vision and the energy you bring to the leadership of Grand Valley State University and for the passion you and Marcia have shown for Grand Rapids. You are great citizens of this place.

I am delighted to be joined this morning by all my colleagues on the Grand Rapids City Commission, by Mayor Rick Root of Kentwood, Mayor Jim Buck of Grandville, and Mayor Jack Poll of Wyoming. We have four state legislators with us this morning Representatives Dean, Schmidt, Pearce and Hildenbrand. There are four County Commissioners, two Community College Trustees and GRCC President Steve Ender, four Grand Rapids School Board members and a Library Commissioner. In addition we have representatives for US Senator Debbie Stabenow and Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land. Would all elected officials and their representatives please stand and receive our thanks for all you do.

#### INTRODUCTION

A sixth grader recently asked me: “What part of being Mayor is most important.” I didn’t hesitate. “It is being the vision-bearer for the City.” I told him about the tradition among many American Indian peoples of the vision quest, of the one chosen from the tribe who prepares himself through meditation and fasting and then goes to a wilderness place where he awaits a vision that will foretell the future. He returns to the tribe and tells them the vision, which they then translate into a dance or a song that is handed down from generation to generation.

The State of the City address is the best example of this vision bearing. For a moment – actually more like 50 minutes! – we can look ahead, together, and glimpse the future. And my hope is that the future I will show you will be so compelling that you will want to embrace it make it your own. Make it *our* own. Because, truly, it takes an entire tribe to translate the vision into a song or dance, to enthuse the young and, ultimately, to fulfill the vision for all of us.

It is not always the case that the vision of the leader is embraced by the entire community. That is why our democracy is so important. If the people hold a different vision from that of the leader, they can change leaders. Some of the visions I have set before you over the past six years have been controversial: fundamental commitment of the municipality to the Grand Rapids Public Schools, municipal independence from fossil-fuel generated electrical power, legislation to create neighborhood improvement districts, streetcars in downtown Grand Rapids, real jobs with workplace experience for young people.

Some visions proved impossible to accomplish like tax capture for public schools through Education Renewal Zones.

Others, like the creation of a Community Sustainability Partnership, seemed modest enough in their conception yet this one captured the attention of the world when the United Nations recognized our work. Many visions presented over the previous six years are being realized but have years – in some cases decades – of work remaining ahead.

But look at the amazing things we have done together.

- Grand Rapids is widely recognized as the strongest economy in Michigan, and that is especially important in these severe times in Michigan. In fact, in November Fortune Magazine recognized our city among the 100 most rapidly recovering in the nation.
- We have continued to enjoy economic development, new construction and job growth. Our downtown entertainment district is growing, residential and retail growth downtown are coming slowly but steadily, and higher education and life sciences sectors are rapidly expanding.
- We have achieved a higher percentage of electrical power from renewable energy than any other Great Lakes basin city and we continue to develop power options toward our goal of 100% renewable by 2020.
- Our students' test scores are improving in the GRPS. In fact we have gone from 26 schools meeting the Federal AYP standard to 45 in just four years. During the same time the District tripled the number of schools earning a B grade or better on the Michigan report card. We have completed the construction or redevelopment of 10 school buildings in the past six years. We are on the cusp of a major education reform effort under the Race to the Top initiative. Grand Rapids has been recognized by the National League of Cities for our outstanding after school programs, a partnership between the City, Public Schools and private sector and every school building in the District now has an after school program.

Do not think for a minute that I am papering over the challenges before us. Double-digit unemployment. Falling City and State tax revenues. An unacceptable drop-out level in our high schools. Steep reductions in the municipal workforce with resulting service diminishment. Minority and women-owned businesses closing. Foreclosure rates at record levels. All these are disturbing trends. No mayor of this city since John Karel and George Welch in the Depression Era has faced the challenges I face today. No City Manager has been forced to stare down the challenges in quite the same way as our City Manager must today. That is why I am grateful to have Greg Sundstrom in the job. You should know that your Mayor and Manager are joined at the hip as we move through the treacherous waters of this economy. You should also know that Greg Sundstrom is masterfully steering the good ship GR through these shoals. Ladies and gentlemen please help me recognize our City Manager Gregory Sundstrom. (Applause)

#### CHAMPIONS OF DIVERSITY AWARD

A vision for the future must speak to, and speak of, the young. No group has any greater stake in the vision for the city than does youth. I'm 60 years old. Much more of my life is behind me than ahead of me. But students in high school and college have a long horizon stretching ahead of them. And today they are holding their breath as they scan that horizon. They are, after all, a generation facing some of the most daunting challenges ever faced by humankind. Exploding population, climate change, insidious new warfare waged by terrorists, skyrocketing domestic unemployment and a shift of manufacturing, engineering and innovation away from America to China and India...all part of the reality of today and tomorrow.

So, any time we can hold up youth as models of problem-solving, any time we can celebrate their accomplishments and encourage them...we want to do that. Each year I use this speech to recognize Champions of Diversity, people in our community who have advanced the cause of civil rights. Last year I brought before you eleven of our elders whose lifelong achievements in diversity have helped to make ours a more just community. How impressive it was to see these great men and women of every race. And yet their collective wrinkles caused me to wonder: who will pick up the torch they have carried for so long? One of the dozen I recognized, Dr. Julius Franks, died shortly before the Award was given; another, Mayor Lyman Parks passed since we were last together here.

And so this year I want to recognize five young people who have already shown a passion for equal justice and a willingness to work – to put themselves on the line – so that ours will continue to be a fairer community. I'm going to read all their names and accomplishments and then ask you to help me honor them with your applause as they come forward.

Walid Azim immigrated to America from Afghanistan in 2001. He has become active in leadership development at Crossroads High School in Kentwood. I first met Walid when he spoke at Kids Speak 2009 and then as a member of the Grand Rapids Youth Commission. Walid wrote, "Everyone has a unique ability and we can combine our skills and abilities to make up one magnificent world community."

Anthony Estrada is a student at Union High School. His family emigrated here from Guatemala. He is active at the Steil Youth Center and in multi-cultural studies and Student Senate at his school, where he shows solid leadership skills. His teacher says, "He worked daily to create a sense of harmony within all the different ethnic groups involved in the city-wide Student Council meetings.

Elliot Keyes, a student at Grand Rapids Christian High School is the Vice President of the mayor's Youth Council. He is a member of the Students Educating Each other about Diversity (SEED). SEED is a student-led club at Christian High School that embraces and celebrates the differences in others. Members give presentations to their classmates and perform community service projects.

KimAnh Nguyen is a student at City High School and a Mayor's Youth Council member. KimAnh also serves on the Superintendent's Council where she reports, "I work side by side with the Superintendent on current GRPS issues including diversity." In her church work at the Vietnamese United Methodist Church, she works with Vietnamese teens all over the US.

LaShone Williams is a student at Ottawa Hills High School and has been active with the Camp Tall Turf Leaders in Training Program. According to her teacher, LaShone "is being trained in racial reconciliation, stereotypes and what it means to be a cross-cultural leader." She is currently implementing a diversity training program for youth ages 8-13.

Would the five of you please come forward so we can thank you for your contributions?

I want to put a challenge before you young people. Over the next twelve months I want to personally work with the five of you on a project – of your choosing – to improve race relations in our community. I want to learn from you, I want to share my experience with you. Together I want us to do something lasting for the sake of diversity and inclusion in Grand Rapids. Then, when we gather next year for the State of the City Address, I want you to join me on this stage and present the results of our work. The

Woodrick Diversity Learning Center of Grand Rapids Community College has committed to work with us. Remember, no vision is too large when it comes to race relations. Challenge us to be our better person, our better community. Are you willing to do that?

#### A BRIEF LOOK BACK

A vision must reflect the past, incorporate learning from our failures and build on our successes. 2009 will forever be known as the year of Green Grand Rapids...and the Green Grand Rapids Plan will forever shape the face of our city. Begun in 2008 as the five year review of the City Master Plan, our efforts gained steam and culminated in the release of a ground-breaking plan in October of 2009. All planning in Grand Rapids is community-based planning and this plan was no exception. Our community drew together over 100 times in public meetings; more than 1800 people participated in the design of the plan. The results are stunning...but are not exactly what we had anticipated. You see, we knew we'd have a great plan when the day was done, and that then we would take its component parts out and sell them to the public. But a funny thing happened on the way to the forum. Teams working on the plan got so enthusiastic about the emerging results that they forged new coalitions and created new organizations, and began to implement the plan before it was even completed. Friends of Grand Rapids Parks formed to raise money for improved parks and green spaces in our city. This non-profit foundation has hosted park clean-up events in all four quadrants of the city. The Greater Grand Rapids Bicycle Coalition formed to implement complete-street design initiatives and seek funding for bike lanes and trails. Under the Coalition's leadership this year Grand Rapids was designated as a bronze-level Bicycle Friendly City and we have our eyes on the gold! And the Grand Rapids Whitewater non-profit organization formed to advance the plans for a Grand River whitewater kayak course. These citizens – every one of whom captured the vision and made it their own – have raised the first money for engineering and hydrological studies.

Also, before the ink was set on the pages of Green Grand Rapids the Planning Department applied for \$1.9 million in federal stimulus funds as part of a larger Kent County grant. If approved on February 28, 2010 we will be able to implement 100 miles of on-street bicycle improvements, we will make safety and access improvements to 20 neighborhood parks, we will install bike parking at four transit stops, we will engineer four miles of sidewalks along 28<sup>th</sup> St., and we will assist in funding consulting services for the Downtown Urban Market.

There are many bold and exciting recommendations in Green Grand Rapids. A few of them are:

- Provide an accessible park within ¼ mile of all residents
- Extend the Riverwalk system from Riverside Park to Millennium Park
- Achieve 40% tree canopy coverage in the city
- Manage stormwater where it falls
- Adopt a Complete Streets ordinance
- Design all streets to be safe, walkable and bikeable, and pleasing to the eye
- Return the Rapids to the river
- Develop ordinances to support community gardening, and
- Support a 4-season downtown farmers' market

As citizen groups coalesce around these audacious goals you will see a new Grand Rapids emerging; a green Grand Rapids; a Grand Rapids that will provide national leadership in the sustainable communities movement.

Another important highlight of the year just past is the use of Recovery Act (or “stimulus”) funding to advance infrastructure, public safety, public transportation and education. In all \$110M came in to Grand Rapids and created jobs while solving pressing community needs. We received public infrastructure money and money to hire police officers; we received transit money to build a new Wealthy Street Operations Center. There was money for home weatherization and there was money for k-12 classroom instruction. There was money for energy efficiency in public buildings and money to seed neighborhood energy projects. Just two weeks ago GRCC received \$4.0M in stimulus money for scholarships through the Pathways Out of Poverty Program.

When you add the impact of stimulus money throughout Kent County these numbers mushroom. Then add to that the stimulus money that Michigan Department of Transportation received that was spent in our metro area and you will soon understand why the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is so important to our economy. Last week I was in Washington in meetings with Administration officials from White House staff and Cabinet officials to the President himself, and the consensus was that this big slow ship we call the American economy is turning the corner and jobs-producing elements of the Recovery Act are making the difference. I know they have made a difference in Grand Rapids. Don't let anybody try to convince you otherwise!

2009 was also the year in which we concluded labor negotiations that resulted in a 4.1% overall concession with all our unions. Labor and management stayed at the table, negotiated hard and always – ALWAYS – held the best interests of the citizens of Grand Rapids first and foremost. We were all impressed and inspired when the Firefighters union stepped forward following announced layoffs and thirteen senior firefighters took early retirement to allow eleven younger firefighters – many with young families – to keep their jobs. The cost of these early retirements is being born by all remaining union members rather than by the City.

One other highlight to recall from 2009 is the very innovative real estate transaction involving the City, Kent County, DeVries Construction Company and the heritage Hill neighbors. The vacant former Kent County Human Services Building at Franklin and Madison was purchased by the City in a land swap with the County, giving the County needed land for parking at their new site. DeVries Construction agreed to purchase the main building from the City in an exchange for our purchase of 1120 N. Monroe, owned by the DeVries Company. The neighborhood will get a new park, the Paul I. Phillips gymnasium will be improved and reopened, a vacant building will be put back into productive re-use, and the City will reduce its overall costs by \$105,000 per year. If that isn't a win all-around, I don't know what is!

## LOOKING FORWARD

As I began today I spoke about vision. I told you that this speech is about looking forward. I want to do that now. It is important to remember what we have accomplished; it is especially important to celebrate those accomplishments in a time such as this when it seems that bad news out-weighs good. But the State of the City address needs to be about vision, about future, about where we are going together.

So let me start with an urgent vision for our future: putting people to work and giving young people real-world work experiences. I'm ready to take our work on job creation to the next level.

I just mentioned that since announcing a goal of creating 500 youth jobs we can count one hundred fifty 15-21 year olds employed in part-timework that teaches them responsibility, hard-work and work-place skills. We need to step that up.

Today I am launching the Mayor's Fifty and challenging fifty local companies to each commit to providing at least one young, job-ready worker with part-time work immersion experiences. The City will commit to pre-employment training through the twelve-week LEAD program to give them work readiness and leadership skills. Further, through a grant for youth employment, we will pay up to 50% of the young worker's wage to \$8.50/hr. for the first eight months of employment. Throughout the year and in various media the City will celebrate the Mayor's Fifty and tell the stories of success. We have been working closely with The Chamber of Commerce, The Workforce Development Board and The Right Place Manufacturer's Council to design a program that will maximize the experience for the youth while minimizing the risk to the employer. These young men and women will get a taste of the workplace and, I hope, a strong dose of mentoring by the employer.

This is a great opportunity for local companies to step up and help prepare our youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. I know it will be a great success. To apply, a company should go to [www.grcity.us/Mayor's50](http://www.grcity.us/Mayor's50) and complete the form found there.

Now let me turn to another critical vision for our future: the vision of intergovernmental cooperation, shared services and consolidation.

This is a popular theme this year. Kent County Commission Chairman Roger Morgan spoke passionately and articulately about regionalism and consolidation in his final State of the County address. The new Chairperson of the Kent County Board of Commissioners, Sandi Frost Parish, has stated her interest in forging new cooperative bonds with areas governments that will advance our common good. And when the day is done and all the 2010 State of the City addresses are stretched end to end from here to the moon, I'm willing to bet that the dominant theme will be intergovernmental cooperation.

Why?

Because this real and present crisis is driving us to find new solutions, to do things that we wouldn't have considered doing under more affluent conditions. Fat times make you a little lazy. They can blind you to the obvious right there before you. It's so easy to keep on keeping on when there's money in the bank and the sun is shining. But fat times are faint memories. We haven't seen surpluses in local government in ten years...and we know it will be many, many years before we see surpluses again.

So you cut and you cut and you cut. You implement processes to find efficiencies, then you implement the efficiencies, then you implement improvements on the efficiencies. The games you can play with your budget, the one-time fixes, the silver bullets, all those played out years ago. All of a sudden the wall you talked about hitting someday hits you today, and while you have always been proud of the quality of services you provide, you find that you've cut so deeply you can no longer deliver what your citizens deserve and expect. That's when you turn to your partners in surrounding communities and you begin to talk.

That is, if you're any old metropolitan area. But we're metro Grand Rapids and we're not typical! We have a long history of intergovernmental cooperation and the consolidation of services. Let me give you a few examples:

- The Rapid is a six city authority that provides transit services within our boundaries, to GVSU in Allendale, and to four townships that contract for services. In 2008 The Rapids was recognized as the best transit system for its size in the United States.
- The Grand Valley Metropolitan Council has been around for 20 years and is made up of 35 units of government: 18 cities, 2 counties, and 15 townships. There is only one such council in the state.
- Our Municipal sewer and water partnership has been functioning for more than a decade under a unique form of contract and a shared-control between Grand Rapids and our customer communities. Grand Rapids Wastewater Treatment Plant was the first in Michigan and the 16<sup>th</sup> agency in the nation to receive National Biosolids Partnership Environmental Management System certification. Today there are only 28 certified agencies in the country.

But wait, that's only the beginning. Six years ago the cities of Grand Rapids, Wyoming, Kentwood, Grandville, Walker and East Grand Rapids formed a partnership with one objective: working together to better deliver municipal services. Out of that partnership, known as the Urban Metro Mayors and Managers – or UMMM – has come:

- Police cooperation in the form of effective inter-governmental teams focused on cold-cases, drug enforcement, vice, cyber-crime and auto theft.
- Fire service innovations like ground-breaking automatic aid agreements.
- Biosolids Authority. The cities of Wyoming and Grand Rapids have created a unique partnership based on shared interest and shared governance. The fact that neither city has a majority on the Board has bred a strong problem-solving consensus-based decision making process.
- Grand Rapids and Walker have initiated service sharing relationships in building and trade inspections.

In fact, when the Citizens Research Council recently tallied up all the joint-venture initiatives involving one or more of these six partners, Kent County, or the GRPS they found over 150 separate ventures. 150!! ranging from recreation to emergency services. The results of this study are reported in "Streamlining Functions and Services of Kent County and Metropolitan Grand Rapids Cities." This report is on the City website for your viewing.

What that means is that we have figured out how to work together in this metro area when other communities were still bickering, pulling in opposite directions. Each of our communities has long been accomplished at forging public-private partnerships built on trust, relationships, and the ability to recognize and respect joint interests, reliability, predictability and performance. In fact, we are enjoying the fruits of one such public/private venture right now, in DeVos Place...a state, county, city partnership with the private sector.

With a track record like we have in this region we are ready to go the next level of excellence in intergovernmental cooperation.

So today I am able to report to you that we are preparing the finishing touches on an important new cooperative venture involving police/fire/emergency dispatch that will set the stage for critical future partnerships. Work is also underway on a second involving fire services.

First let me tell you about dispatch. Oddly enough it all started with Biosolids. The member communities of the Biosolids Authority had to create a new entity out of whole cloth. That meant drafting bylaws, writing a business plan, developing operating agreements and, ultimately, implementing capital projects. It was all about negotiation, respect for one another, and bucket-loads of creative thinking. Along the way, through the problem-solving maze, members became partners, and partners became friends.

Fast forward to 2009. The same players are enmeshed in a budget struggle of historic proportion! But now we have a basis in trust. Our police and fire staff have worked together on UMMM committees. We are already partners in the Kent County Dispatch Authority. So discussions led to exploratory meetings, meetings which led to information sharing; and out of that fertile ground emerged the framework for a new partnership in police and fire dispatch.

Wyoming City Manager Curtis Holt took the lead in developing the metrics based upon financial information provided by Grand Rapids. The resulting business model is sized to handle the needs of our two communities. Governance, just as it is in the Biosolids Authority is shared equally. The projected savings are significant: \$1.0M to the City of Grand Rapids and \$500,000 to the City of Wyoming. One and one-half million dollars on a combined \$7.5M.

The model is scalable so that other communities can be added. Most importantly, the model is transferable to other services.

So...if you think that's cool, then let me tell you about fire services. Wyoming and Grand Rapids have begun discussions about shared fire services based on the model developed for dispatch. This will take longer to develop but the indications are strong for this potential combination that will save precious resources and preserve critical services. Again, this model will be scalable to permit other communities to join. We are stronger and we are more efficient the more we partner with others.

Consolidating services is surely about saving money. It is also about creating efficiencies. But, first and foremost, consolidation is about maintaining and enhancing quality of life for our residents. It is about standardizing regulations to take the hassle out of doing business. Consolidation permits improved service levels and the delivery of expensive specialized services in a cost-effective manner in the urban environment.

I want to give the credit where it is due. While elected officials in our cities have given the policy direction that has led to this collaboration, it is the staff leadership that bargains, hour after hour, to craft these agreements. We have City Managers and other gifted municipal staff who have come to points of impasse and then figured out new ways to get around them.

If we can achieve these results on critical services such as dispatch and fire then there a dozen other areas where we can collaborate. Could we imagine a day when each unit of government would maintain its Commission or Council but most services would be merged under relationships like dispatch and managed by joint governance boards?

For that matter, might the day come when we look around and say to ourselves, "We're acting as one, why don't we simply become one? Why don't we forge one city out of six?"

Ultimately, could we create one combined government whose borders are the Kent County lines?

Former Kent County Board Chair Roger Morgan said. "Moving the 'regionalism' and 'consolidation' debate more swiftly and strategically from talk to action is common sense."

Roger also pointed out that countywide consolidation would make us the 23<sup>rd</sup> largest city in the country, between El Paso and Milwaukee in size.

Does size matter? Yes, it does!

It gives us political clout. It puts us on the radar screen of companies seeking new markets. It makes us eligible for federal grants for transportation, homeland security, education and a dozen other areas where currently we are simply too small to qualify. It links our interests, our talents and our resources in vibrant new combinations. The most potent thing we could do that would have lasting economic impact on our region would be to consolidate governments. The most important thing we could do to contribute to the restoration of a strong Michigan economy would be to consolidate governments. The greatest gift we could leave for our grandchildren would be a consolidated government.

Oh, there are hurdles to jump. It's not easy to consolidate. But there are tools that would help ease the way.

If the State were as serious about Michigan's future as we are here in this room, the State would lead with bold action befitting of our times. It would demand and direct action by enacting legislation that would remake Michigan's Future. They would be taking the steps we are taking here together.

Our forefathers in Michigan found the courage to consolidate school districts in the 1960's. Canada, Australia and New Zealand all have consolidated local governments with good results. There are domestic examples like Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Charlotte, Louisville, Portland and even the boroughs of New York.

It is times like these that test a people. We are all "Michiganders" and "Grand Rapidians." I know what Grand Rapidians are made of. I see it every day. Our response to crisis is to innovate, to create a new future for our region. That is what we all must do as Michiganders.

We need action and we need it now, not in 2011, 2012 or 2013. Let me be clear about what we need. We have proposed a series of simple changes critical to solving these problems. The vicissitudes of partisanship and lack of vision in Lansing have stalled earnest efforts to move this reform agenda for most of a decade. We wanted to prepare for the coming storm. Lansing did not heed our warning then. Now the ship of state is foundering, awash in red ink of its own making. Michigan is dragging us onto the same shoals. I begin today by saying to the State of Michigan, "Take these arcane shackles off of local government. Stop loading us with unfunded mandates. Clear the hurdles to consolidation that restrict us in every way. Do it now! Then get out of our way and watch what the governments of Kent County can do. There is more creativity here than you can imagine."

One tool that is very intriguing was proposed by my predecessor, John Logie. It is called the Metropolitan Rebate. Its premise is that, if the citizens of two or more governmental units elect to consolidate their governments, a portion of the state income tax collected from all those living within the boundaries would be captured and returned to the new consolidated government. Why stop there? Might not the new municipality roll back a portion of the property tax levy? Might not the state treat

business in the same fashion, returning a portion of its MBT collection to the consolidated government? Through the application of carefully chosen incentives the state of Michigan could accelerate the economic growth of a region by encouraging consolidation.

So, rather than simply gnawing on the bone of local government, chewing away pieces of statutory Revenue Sharing year after bitter year, do something positive for local government. Free us up, turn us loose and watch us lead Michigan back to prosperity.

There is still time and I intend to make the most of it.

I pledge to my partners, to all of you in this room, my commitment to do all in my power to implement service sharing partnerships like dispatch, fire service, and yes – Biosolids.. I will do all in my power, joined with my partners here today and new partners from across Michigan, to rally forces in Lansing for change that will remake Michigan now before it is too late.

Join with me now. It is time for action, not excuses. It is time to save Michigan, to save Grand Rapids.

## CONCLUSION

My vision for our city is a community that celebrates its diversity, one that is livable and sustainable, one that prepares its young people to live in an ever-more complex world; and, mostly, one that works collaboratively throughout the region to ensure maximum benefit for all the people who live here.

Perhaps the grandest vision of all is a vision of an engaged citizenry pulling together in a time of crisis to ensure that quality of life is not abandoned and that no one is left behind in our march toward the future. It has been said that democracy is not a spectator sport to which I would add “absentee citizenship is not an option.”

These times, more acutely than any we have known before, demand our deepest engagement. I love this city. I know that you do to. And while there is much about which we can be justifiably proud here we also must recognize the fragile nature of our bond. No longer can we afford to be east side and west side. No longer can we turn a deaf ear to the needs of neighbors. And no longer can we assume that municipal government will provide for every need without our engagement.

We have entered a new era in which local government is, and will remain, leaner and more agile. No longer the lumbering giant of yesteryear, your local government is sleek and nimble, flexible and focused. We have been – and we must continue to be – driven by excellence. Citizens expect nothing less.

But these times also call for a new form of citizenry. More than simply voting and forgetting, the citizen of today must be willing to roll up her sleeves and take initiative at the neighborhood level. The structures to do that are already in place...neighborhood associations and civic organizations. The models to inspire us are multiple; people who have voluntarily stepped forward to create neighborhood watch programs, to organize block clubs, to care for neighborhood parks, or to organize PTA at the neighborhood school. White water kayakers who plan construction of a kayak course in the Grand River. Bicyclists who organize to develop complete-street initiatives. Parks enthusiasts who create a foundation to collect funds to enhance park space.

Our City Manager has been talking about using municipal government as a “platform” to support citizens in their civic initiatives. Let me tell you what I think that means. Governmental leaders, elected and staff, must first ensure that basic services are delivered, and that they are delivered efficiently and cost-effectively. Governmental leaders, elected and staff, must maintain the tools, sharpened and polished and easily accessible to assist citizens in doing important initiatives be they neighborhood-based or city-wide. Then those government leaders, elected and staff, must get out of the way and let the citizens do what needs to be done. We can harness the energy, we can provide the structure, we can promote the ideas, but we must let our citizens accomplish the great things they have in mind.

When we succeed as a “platform” government will look vastly different from the way it looks today. But we will have recovered the spirit of American democracy, captured by the French observer Alexis deToqueville in 1848 in these words:

“The common man in the United States has understood the influence of the general prosperity on his own happiness, an idea so simple but nevertheless so little understood by the people. Moreover, he is accustomed to regard that prosperity as his own work. So he sees the public fortune as his own, and he works for the good of the state...”

That is our goal: “the common prosperity”, the “good of the state.” Finally, that is why we live in cities rather than hermitages in the woods. That is why we bind ourselves to this place and make it our own. That is why we care about what happens to our neighbor. Because our individual happiness is linked inextricably to the general prosperity. What happens to one, for good or for ill, effects us all and shapes the quality of the life we live together.

Call it building on a platform; or call it citizen engagement. We’re on this journey together. And everything handed down from our ancestors; everything that our experience here has taught us; everything we dream of becoming; prepares us for this momentous time.

We are community. A people with a vision. No hardship will turn us. No crisis defeat us. Eyes forward, backs straight, wills firm, minds sharp.

Tomorrow lies before us...and after that, tomorrow and tomorrow. We are on our way to a fresh, bold and prosperous future.

Steeled by justice. Tempered by mercy. Bound together by a passion for the common good.

Let us go...and imagine the shape of our new connected community; and then build it, brick by brick board by board, idea by idea, life by life...together.